[Software Review]

VTrain 3.0 - Virtual FlashCards for Language Learners

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Introduction

This article is a review of VTrain (Vocabulary Trainer), a flashcard program designed to assist with the memorization of vocabulary. Using Schreck and Schreck's (1991) model for CALL software evaluation, this review is divided into three primary sections: 1) Content and Presentation, 2) The Learning Experience, and 3) The Usefulness of VTrain in the Curriculum.

General Description

VTrain is a shareware program that allows users to be quizzed on a series of questions, using a flashcard format. The Lessons are also called Cardfiles, and each Cardfile consists of a number of vocabulary flashcards. Each time students are asked questions, the flashcard is either promoted or demoted to a Cardfile "Box." Furthermore, users can schedule training sessions based upon the level of knowledge they have with each Lesson.

At first glance, VTrain appears to be quite similar to simple drill and practice programs used in audiolingual labs in the 1970s and '80s; however, its editing and multimedia capabilities are state-of-the-art.

The software was designed by Paul Radle, and it comes in three languages (English, German, and Spanish). An evaluation version is available for download at http://www.paul-raedle.de/vtrain/home.htm. Individual licenses are (US) $15, and educational licenses are free upon request.

System Requirements

VTrain is only available for use on PC Windows' platforms. It works with MS Windows 95, 98, ME, NT, 2000 and XP. It requires 4 MB of RAM, an SVGA video card, and a minimum of 2.5 MB of hard disk space. To utilize all of the sound playback and recording features, it is also necessary to have a Windows-compatible soundcard, speakers, and a microphone.

Content and Presentation

Quality CALL software programs contain appropriate content for learners (structured at suitable levels of difficulty), have easy to follow instructions, provide useful and clear

question prompts, accept all reasonable answers, and supply appropriate and useful feedback.

Appropriateness of Content

Initially, the large variety of free content available may appear to be one of VTrain's largest advantages. After all, from the VTrain homepage, users can download dozens of vocabulary Cardfiles (offered in more than 40 languages) for free. Each downloadable file consists of a Lesson, and each Lesson consists of a stack of vocabulary flashcards that can be used to memorize any kind of information (as long as it is structured in a question and answer format).

The size of each Lesson (i.e., the number of flashcards) varies greatly. For this review, Spanish, Russian, Indonesian, Sanskrit, and "Everyday Life" Cardfiles were downloaded. The Lessons contained between 11 and 17,000 flashcards. Each Lesson had a different vocabulary and language learning objectives. Some Lessons were designed to assist with the memorization of single words and phrases, others were aimed at developing competence with word-level grammar, and some were designed to develop more specialized linguistic knowledge (e.g., false cognates and collocations).

While VTrain's powerful editing features allow language teachers and students to modify each flashcard to suit individual needs, the appropriateness of the content of these freeware Lessons was dependant upon the curricular goals of the language instructors who created the Cardfiles.

The majority of the Lesson content in this review appeared to be suitable for a wide range of language learners; however, the Lessons did not have clear pedagogical foundations. The content was most often in the form of word lists and was not structured in logical, progressive sequences.

Because of the limitations described above, the development of content (Cardfiles/Lessons) suitable for learners with different proficiencies and different language backgrounds must be created by language instructors who opt to incorporate VTrain into their curriculum. Thus, the content available for free may best be thought of as a model for future Lesson development.

Instructions

For people with extensive backgrounds in IT, and for those who happen to be native speakers of English, German, or Spanish, the instructions for using VTrain are relatively clear. However, due to the use of low-frequency vocabulary, technical jargon, and idiomatic expressions, it is highly unlikely that beginners will find the instructions easy to follow. In other words, VTrain may require instructors to spend a significant amount of time upfront training students to use the software.

With this said, VTrain provides extensive instructions for most of its features. On the main toolbar, there is a Help button with a Contents section which has a searchable index. Under the Help button, some Tutorials provide beginners with step by step instructions: "How do I hold a Training Session," and "How do I edit my Flashcard Lessons."

Presentation

VTrain delivers high-quality text, images, audio, and video to learners. However, the user interface is not easy to navigate without an extensive review of the Help section and/or Tutorials.

The main interface consists of File, Edit, View, Lesson, Train, List, Cardfile, Statistics, Tools, Window, and Help menus. Unfortunately, there are editing tools under the File menu that make operating VTrain unduly complicated. For example, under the File menu, the first button is "New Lesson." Logically, it would make sense that the New Lesson button would allow learners to open new vocabulary Lessons, but instead, this button opens the "Editing the Lesson" feature used (by instructors) to create new vocabulary Cardfiles.

To open a vocabulary Lesson, users have to scan down the File menu and locate "New Cardfile" or "Open Cardfile" (the 7th and 8th buttons down the list, respectively). The New Cardfile button is only used the first time students use a Lesson, and it is a complicated procedure that most likely requires assistance. Fortunately, each subsequent time learners open a Lesson, they are to select the Open Cardfile option and locate the Cardfile that they wish to work on.

After opening a Cardfile, the Lesson interface is quite slick and easy to operate. The main "Training" windows consist of three frames. Each flashcard consists of a front and a back. The fronts are questions and the backs are answers. The upper left frame is the question frame and the upper right frame is where answers appear. Users click on the bottom frame to type their answers.

Question Prompts

Because the question prompts may be composed and edited by the Cardfile programmers (i.e., instructors), VTrain provides teachers with a great amount of flexibility. For example, if university EFL instructors in Japan wish to focus on building TOEIC vocabulary, they may want to create a Cardfile with the most commonly used lexical items in this instrument. The fronts and backs could be in either Japanese or English, and the instructors have the option of attaching text, audio, images, and videos to the fronts and backs of each card.

By allowing the incorporation of contextual clues, the multimedia capabilities of VTrain greatly enhance the learning experience as students can use top-down and bottom-up processing to derive answers. The audio and video files can either be attached to the cards directly (so that they automatically play) or linked so that they may be played upon demand.

The question prompts can be single words, phrases, or sentences. Moreover, users can arrange the cards to be presented in several ways (all fronts, all backs, or mixed). In this way, answer prompts may also be used as question prompts.

Judging Answers

In regard to VTrain's ability to judge correct answers, it does a good job when the programmers have performed their jobs well. In other words, the courseware can allow a variety of correct responses to question prompts. For example, if the answer to a question is "George Bush," instructors may program acceptable responses to be "President Bush," "G. Bush," "Bush," "Militarist," or whatever the instructor deems appropriate.

Additionally, the programmer can determine whether answers must be case sensitive, include punctuation and whether special characters are required.

Feedback

Below the answer frame is a menu bar with three buttons from which students can check their answers. Once students have typed their answers, they can check them by pressing Ctrl + Enter, or by clicking on the Enter button. If the answer is correct, the students are given a prompt in the upper right frame that states, "Exactly! That's it. Fine, you hit it! The flashcard was promoted to the next box."

If users do not know an answer, they have the option of clicking two other buttons, "Show Me the Solution" (Ctrl + A) or "Dunno" (Ctrl + Backspace). The Show Me the Solution button provides a correct answer to the prompt but does not count this response as incorrect. Therefore, students are given the opportunity of typing the correct answer, and the flashcard will then be promoted to the next box. If students choose Dunno, they are given the prompt "Sorry - next time you'll do better" and are provided with the solution. In this case, the flashcard remains in the first box and is randomly reshuffled into the Cardfile.

For incorrect responses, VTrain tells users they are wrong and it prompts the students to try again. Users can determine how many incorrect responses are allowed before moving to the next flashcard.

The Learning Experience

Mechanical Features

Once students have learned how to open and run a Cardfile, the learners' attention is solely focussed on the content of each flashcard, and it is relatively simple for students to maneuver around in the Training windows. If users have difficulties, the software includes context-sensitive help for every window (by pressing F1).

Inside the Training windows, learners are never left guessing which button or which shortcut keys to press. The key naming schemes are consistent and easy to remember.

The mechanical features also provide users with considerable control over a Lesson during Training sessions. Students can skip individual flashcards, go to the beginning or end of a Cardfile, set the timing rates between flashcards, ask for hints, obtain correct answers without being admonished, and sequence their learning. Furthermore, there is a "Flashing" feature that acts as a slideshow for vocabulary review, and learners can exit the program at any point.

Users are also able to assign a specific keyboard layout to each Training frame (e.g., one language for the question frame and one for the answer frame). After users set this option, the software automatically switches keyboards when moving from one frame to the other. This mechanical feature is particularly useful for languages such as Japanese and Chinese.

Aesthetic Features

The basic VTrain package is not loaded with bells and whistles and therefore is aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, the visual features can be manipulated in a wide variety of ways. The software supports Rich Text Format; therefore, programmers can change the size color and fonts of any text to create unique flashcards.

The Usefulness of VTrain in the Curriculum

The decision of whether to adopt this software rests largely on the context in which it will be used. In Japan, where the primary learning style (K-12) is memorization, VTrain's approach makes a lot of sense. Japanese learners are familiar and comfortable with memorization activities and often use vocabulary flashcards to learn from.

If the goals of a curriculum include the expansion of lexical and/or grammatical items, this software may be of value; however, the following considerations should be considered first:

1. Do instructors have sufficient knowledge to successfully design and implement the program?
2. Will release time be given to faculty for Cardfile programming?

Conclusion

VTrain is a useful software package for learning vocabulary and other content. However, it is much more than a simple memorization device: it is also a powerful flashcard authoring tool. Unfortunately, the way that the editing features are integrated into the interface may make it overly cumbersome for some users to operate initially. Nevertheless, after students are trained to open Cardfiles and taught to maneuver through the Training windows, the package is relatively easy to handle. Moreover, VTrain's flexibility and its student-centered approach to learning make it worth adopting, particularly in the Japanese context. If instructors and curriculum planners have basic programming skills, VTrain could become a valuable addition to any foreign language curriculum or self-access learning environment.

Reference

Schreck, R. & Schreck, J. (1991). Computer-assisted language learning. In M. Celce-Murcia (ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*, 472-486. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.